

Using Mediation to Reduce Truancy

by Mary Ann Lumpkin

School attendance is one of the targets that schools must meet under the No Child Left Behind Legislation in order to make Adequate Yearly Progress. This requirement has focused renewed attention on the problem of truancy. South Carolina state law mandates that students who accumulate ten unexcused absences be referred to family court. This method of dealing with truancy places the family and school in adversarial positions damaging any possibility of a positive family-school relationship. The court system itself is not designed to uncover the root issues affecting student attendance and unless the underlying cause of absenteeism remains unaddressed the truant behavior is likely to continue. Repeat offenses can result in incarceration in a juvenile justice facility for up to ninety days. South Carolina is one of only two states in the nation that still uses this method to punish truant behavior.

According to the United States Department of Education, programs that successfully reduce truancy must involve schools, families, and the community, and they must uncover and address the root issues affecting attendance. Parents, educators and practitioners are finding that mediation is an effective alternative method for dealing with truancy. Below are two stories that are just a sampling of the myriad reasons that thousands of students across South Carolina miss school every day.

Case I: Jonathon, a five-year-old kindergarten student, has eight unexcused absences and behavior problems in school. Lisa, the mother, begins to cry as she tries to explain the reason for her son's excessive absences. "I have to be at work at

4:00 a.m. on the assembly line. I drop my son off at a friend's house at 3:00 a.m. to get to work on time. She isn't very reliable and doesn't always get up in time to get him to school. I am a dropout and I want Jonathon to get a good education and have better than me. I'm doing the best I can, but I'm a single parent and I don't have any choice."



Mary Ann Lumpkin leads a workshop during the spring SIC mini-conference in Columbia

Case II: Martha, an eighth grader, has twelve unexcused absences and is regularly involved in arguments with other students at school. Martha's grandmother says with exasperation, "I don't know what to do with her. She hides in the woods until she misses the school bus, and I don't have a car to take her myself. I would walk her to the bus stop but my arthritis makes it too painful." After thirty minutes of questioning and discussion, Martha cautiously opens up and says, "The kids at school make fun of me because my daddy killed himself. I hate them, and I hate going to school."

Fortunately for these families the root issues affecting attendance were uncovered and effectively addressed through a truancy mediation program currently oper-

ating in Lexington/Richland School District Five and an elementary school in Darlington County. This early form of intervention has allowed families to improve their children's attendance, avoid family court, and build better relationships with the schools.

Briefly, truancy mediation is an intervention that brings the family and school (usually the school social worker) together in a non-threatening environment such as a local church. With the help of a neutral mediator asking questions and guiding the discussion, root issues are uncovered and effectively addressed. The school representative acts as an aid and advocate for the family, and the mediation process empowers parents and students to take responsibility and action to ensure educational success. During the 2001 - 2003 school years, 83 cases were mediated in Lexington/Richland School District 5. Students averaged 10.7 unexcused absences prior to mediation and less than

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Message from . . . the Executive Director

Looking Back, Looking Ahead

Congratulations and expressions of appreciation go out to all SIC members for completing a very active year as a volunteer working to improve your school. It has also been a very active year for the SC-SIC staff who have worked to improve access to training opportunities and other resources for council members to help them do their work more effectively.

The regional SIC conferences were deemed a success by those attending and by the staff. More council members from more schools participated in the fall and spring series than ever before. The evaluations immediately following confirmed that a half day on a Saturday was the best time to hold the conferences and that it was a good use of that time. The conference series will continue and the dates for the year are posted on page five. Please feel free to cut out page five and place it on your bulletin board or in your SIC binder as a handy reference. Plan to come and enjoy learning with your colleagues.

Those who attended the conferences have received a survey asking how they used the skill or information gained at the conference to contribute to their council's effectiveness. If you received the survey, please complete and return it. You will be making a contribution to improving the effectiveness of this office.

The SC-SIC staff turned to technology this year to get as much information as possible to the largest number of council members. A video version of the Handbook was produced and distributed to all of the districts for their councils' use and two power point presentations are on the SC-SIC Web site ready for downloading. Six half-hour Council Updates on current issues and events were broadcast via ETV satellite so schools could tape them for their SICs. These videos will be available this fall as a set. Watch upcoming issues of *Council News* and the SC-SIC Web site for more details.

One of the greatest advantages of using technology is that it is available to schools at no cost. The SC-SIC Web site has become a prime location for assistance to councils: samples of reports the SIC must write, handouts from the conference workshops, and sample bylaws. We make it a practice now to post on the Web site anything we publish in print such as the newsletter before it goes to the printer, the Handbook (including a Spanish version), and most recently the brochure, "Answers to Your Questions About No Child Left Behind in South Carolina." Make sure to take advantage of these items by downloading and copying them for your parents and others interested in school improvement.

The 2004-05 school year already promises to be a challenging one in many ways. Consider using the summer for planning and preparation to be ready when school starts and invite new students and their families to join with you in the school improvement process.



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The University of South Carolina system provides affirmative action and equal opportunity in education and employment for all qualified persons regardless of race, religion, sex, national origin, age, disability or veteran status.

SC-SIC Welcomes New Staff Member



SC-SIC welcomes Claudia P. Wolverton as our new full time Project Specialist in the Columbia office. A University of South Carolina alumnus, Claudia brings two decades of graphic design, computer technology, and public relations experience to the Project Specialist position. She is an independent graphic artist, certified Computer Assisted Designer, former member of the United Way Speakers' Bureau and an advocate for people with disabilities.

FYI...

Free Tutors for Schools "In Need of Improvement"

No Child Left Behind mandates Supplemental Services for children in schools that are "in need of improvement." If your child's school falls into this category, he or she is likely to be eligible for free tutoring services. The SESQ Center (Supplemental Education Services Quality Center) Web site supported by the US Dept. of Education will supply parents with a host of information on these services including what providers are available in SC and how organizations can apply to become providers. Visit www.tutorsforkids.org or call the Center at 866-544-8686.

School Survey Data Now Available

Each year the State Department of Education conducts surveys of parents, teachers and students to gather information about our schools for publication in the School Report Card. This year's survey results have been sent to the schools. This data can be useful for SICs working to put together the next five-year strategic plan for their schools. Council members can view the Council Update titled "Understanding the School Report Card" to hear a discussion of how to use survey information for planning. Check the Newsletter Archives at www.ed.sc.edu/sic for related articles and watch for a new Council Update on the topic coming this fall.

Mediation

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one (.8) after mediation. Only three students during these two years were referred to Family Court; that's a 97% success rate!

Failure to positively address truancy results in:

- A greater number of individuals and families dependent on welfare
- Higher dropout and crime rates, more gangs, and drug abuse problems, and more tax dollars going to the prison system
- Poor performing schools and lower test scores
- Less industry and business coming to South Carolina and a lower tax base

Addressing truancy through mediation will:

- Increase student attendance, thereby improving school performance and test scores.

- Increase the amount of federal funds appropriated to our schools.
- Lower the dropout rate and reduce crime, drug abuse, and gang involvement.
- Create a successful educated populace that will attract business and industry to South Carolina.

Truancy mediation operates through the use of trained volunteer mediators in the community, making it a low cost and highly effective mechanism for addressing truancy. The price of neglecting the truancy problem is too high for our children, our communities and our state.

Mary Ann Lumpkin is the director of Conflict Solutions, LLC. For more information about truancy mediation programs contact Mary Ann at 803-743-4550 or director@conflictsolutions.org.



SIC Action Timeline

June & July

- Complete the School Report Card narrative in conjunction with the principal, June 15.
- Review and revise SIC bylaws.
- Recruit parents to stand for (fall) election to the SIC.
- Identify members of the non-parent community to serve on the SIC.
- Analyze results of the surveys completed by parents, teachers, and students in grades 5, 8, and 11 and make plans to address areas needing improvement.

August

- Coordinate preparations for fall SIC elections of parents and teachers, and students 9-12.
- Gather materials new SIC members will need (SIC Handbook, last year's minutes, Report to the Parents, bylaws) and put them into a notebook for each SIC member.
- Recommend any bylaw revisions for approval.
- Get ready to participate in the strategic planning process to develop a new 5-year plan.
- Review criteria for the Dick and Tunky Riley School Improvement Award in preparation for applying.
- Order lapel pins for all SIC members from SC-SIC. (Not required, but nice to have!)

POINT OF VIEW

SC-SIC Board of Trustees Comments and Commentary



March for Education Equity

by Maria Gregory Taylor

On Saturday, May 15, 2004, I traveled with a Greenville County parent and her seven year old daughter, Lee and Alexis Ferguson from Simpsonville, SC, to participate in the March for Education Equity rally on the Statehouse grounds in Columbia.

So why were we marching? I guess being a child born in the 1950's, I was oblivious to the magnitude of the disservice accorded to the black students living in South Carolina and a number of other states during that time. If you were a black child in Clarendon County, South Carolina in 1940 you probably spent the better part of the day walking to and from school, while the white children of the community passed you on their school buses.

Fifty years ago, a lawsuit in Clarendon County, Briggs vs. Elliot, challenged the inequality in education. Briggs vs. Elliott and a handful of other cases were combined with Brown vs. Board of Education, the landmark Kansas case that led to nationwide desegregation.

Fast forward to the year 2004. Does our state provide equal education for all students in South Carolina? The answer is NO. Funding for education comes from the state and federal government with each county utilizing local property taxes to supplement funding. Our poorer districts lack a strong tax base to support the basic education needs of their children and the population of these districts is overwhelmingly African American. Combine this scenario with the fact that \$450 million has been cut from schools in South Carolina in the last four years. Are we moving backward?

The March for Education Equity began in front of the 134 year old Zion Baptist Church. Old friendships were renewed and new ones were formed. We gathered in support of adequate funding for "all children" of South Carolina. While we walked just six blocks, I could only visualize the many black children who walked nine miles to and from school in Clarendon County. A school bus filled with excited children led the way. Walkers lined up behind the bus with parents and children holding a banner: "Fund Education

Now!" A chant broke out as the marchers proceeded down Main Street. Leading the way was former SC Supreme Court Chief Justice Ernest Finney, state Superintendent of Education Inez Tenenbaum, and author Pat Conroy. The crowd was several hundred people strong when we left the church, with more and more people joining along the way. By the time the school bus reached the Statehouse grounds, those following it numbered several thousand.



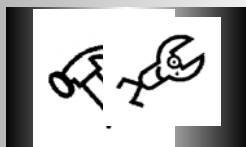
Author Pat Conroy addresses the crowd at the March for Education Equity Rally at the Statehouse.

The program offered a platform for many of our leaders to speak on behalf of our children. Governor Richard Riley was greeted with a standing ovation when he said, "I am here today because I believe in the power of education. I have seen it work." He suggested that South Carolina set a goal to cut the school dropout rate and ensure that 100% of our children graduate from high school eight years from now. Riley said the state's economy would not prosper as long as it educated only some of its children.

As I look toward retirement after spending 30 plus years in early childhood education, I have a renewed spirit and faith in the people of South Carolina. I see a collaborative effort forming to make the voices of our children heard. It costs money to ensure there is "no child left behind." We must encourage our state leaders to make children the state's highest priority, and fulfill the promises that they make to the children.

And each of us must do our part. Are you willing to support this renewed spirit? Are you willing to encourage your SIC and parent/teacher organization to join the ongoing March for Equity in Education? If so, please e-mail me at mtaylor200@hotmail.com and let me know how you plan to make a difference.

Maria Gregory Taylor lives in Simpsonville and joined the SC School Improvement Council Board of Trustees in 2003. Ms. Taylor is the Program Manager for Parent Education at the Golden Strip Family and Child Development Center for the Greenville County School District.



SIC Toolkit

Publications

COUNCIL NEWS - This six page newsletter is mailed to SIC members' home addresses. Make sure your members receive this important newsletter by sending updated contact information to your district office promptly.

SIC HANDBOOK "THE BASICS" - Every SIC member needs their own copy to serve as their guide to being an effective council member. *Request* a copy from your SIC District Contact or from the SC-SIC office. *Download* a copy from the SIC Web site; two PowerPoint versions of different lengths are also available for downloading. *Obtain* a video version from your SIC District Contact or taping center (DELIC). A *Spanish* version of the Handbook is also available on the Web site and look for a Spanish version of the video handbook coming this fall.

NCLB - contact the SC-SIC office for a copy of this brochure focused specifically on South Carolina or download your copy from the Web site.

CREATING AN EDUCATION FOUNDATION FOR YOUR SCHOOL - this handbook module is available on the Web site or request a hard copy from the SC-SIC office.

Videos

COUNCIL UPDATES - Thirty minute videos on timely and engaging topics of interest to all SICs. Contact your SIC District Contact or taping center (DELIC) for a copy. And coming this fall, Council Updates will be available on the SIC Web site in *streaming video*! SIC District Contacts will also receive the six program set from 2003-04 on DVD this fall for viewing on a computer or video monitor.

Web Site

www.ed.sc.edu/sic - Just click to find publications, streaming video, PowerPoint downloads, current events, access to governing laws, sample bylaws and reports to the parents and more!

Need Help?

ASSISTANCE from experienced SC-SIC staff members is just a click or a call away. Call 1-800-868-2232 or 803-777-7658 or email sic@gwm.sc.edu anytime!



Mark Your Calendar!

The dates and locations for the SIC Regional Conferences have been set. Check the SC-SIC Web site and the Back to School issue of the *Council News* for conference details and registration information. A similar program will be presented at all three fall conferences regardless of location; the spring program will be repeated at all locations with the exception of the addition of the Riley Award presentation on March 19. SIC members are welcome to attend at any location. Please mark your calendar now and *save* the dates of your choice.

Fall Regional SIC Conference Schedule

OCTOBER 30, 2004	HOLIDAY INN, MT. PLEASANT
NOVEMBER 6, 2004	MARRIOTT, GREENVILLE
NOVEMBER 13, 2004	EMBASSY SUITES, COLUMBIA

Spring Regional SIC Conference Schedule

FEBRUARY 26, 2005	HOLIDAY INN, MT. PLEASANT
MARCH 5, 2005	MARRIOTT, GREENVILLE
MARCH 19, 2005	EMBASSY SUITES, COLUMBIA

Riley Award Round One Application Due

Round One of the Riley Award will be due in the Columbia office during the month of November. Check out the award application on the SC-SIC Web site or call the Columbia office for more information. Watch for the announcement of the exact due date and other Riley Award information in the Back to School issue of the *Council News* and on the Web site.

District Contact Meeting Set

The annual SIC District Contact meeting will be held on Wednesday, September 22 at ETV in Columbia. Details to follow!

AND THE WINNER IS...



Ten New Flagship Schools of Promise

Ten new schools have achieved Flagship School of Promise status for 2004 and 17 have renewed their status, earning the right to fly the flag for another three years. South Carolina leads the nation in the number of schools participating in the national America's Promise program and even boasts six districts that have earned Flagship status since 1999. Flagship schools are recognized for providing students with five fundamental resources: an ongoing relationship with an adult; a safe place to learn and grow; a healthy start; a marketable skill; and an opportunity to give back to society through service. This year's new Flagship Schools of Promise include: McLees E.S. and Midway E.S., Anderson 5; Cheraw Intermediate, Chesterfield; J. Paul Truluck M.S., Florence 3; Timmonsville H.S., Florence 4; Pinecrest E.S., Greenwood 50; Ninety-Six H.S., Greenwood 52; Doby's Mill E.S. Kershaw; Orchard Park E.S., Oconee; A.C. Moore E.S. and St. Andrews M.S., Richland 1. To view a complete list of the Flagship schools and districts visit www.scasa.org and to learn more about America's Promise visit www.americaspromise.org.

Riley Award Winners Recognized

The principals of the five schools whose SICs won the Dick & Tunky Riley School Improvement Award and Honorable Mentions for the award will be recognized at the annual SCASA Summer Leadership Institute in Myrtle Beach on June 23, 2004.

SC Teacher of the Year Named

Linda Blanc Winburn, a social studies teacher at Parkway Summit Middle School in Richland 2, was named SC Teacher of the Year at a banquet in Columbia last May. State Superintendent of Education Inez Tenenbaum announced the award along with last year's winner, Jason Fulmer of Aiken. Ms. Winburn will take a year-long leave from the classroom to represent the state's 47,000 teachers. The award includes a \$25,000 cash prize and the use of a new BMW Roadster for one year. Four other teachers were named finalists for the prestigious award: Malia Towels Dunn, Chesterfield; Ruth Taylor, Darlington; Angela S. Cooper, Richland 1; and Amelia Kinard, Spartanburg 5.

78 Schools Earn Red Carpet Awards

This award recognizes schools that go the extra mile to provide excellent customer service and a family friendly environment. "These schools are doing an outstanding job of providing a warm and inviting setting," said State Superintendent of Education Inez Tenenbaum. "But they do more than that. Parents and community members are key players in the decision-making process. The schools use good customer service skills and active community partnerships to make themselves better learning environments." The winners join a list of 211 schools that have received the award over the last two years. To view a list of the winners and learn more about the award visit www.myschools.com.

